Avian Archetypes and Feminine Transformation in Tripura Folklore

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ABSTRACT

Folktales carry oral traditions, ecological wisdom, and cultural values of the communities that maintain them, according to William Bascom, who observes that they amuse, educate, and maintain conformity while reflecting social and spiritual beliefs. *The Tribal Folk Tales of Tripura,* written by D. K. Tyagi, preserves the oral narratives of the tribes of Tripura, where animals, spirits, and deities serve as symbols of cultural identity and ecological balance. The Tripura folktales show the interconnections between the oppression of women and nature and demonstrate continuity and resilience. This paper reveals archetypal themes of transformation, retribution, and redemption, affirming folktales as cultural documents of survival and imagination.

Keywords: Oral tradition, Ecofeminism, Metamorphosis, Allegory, Animism.

Introduction

Folktales are customary stories passed down orally from one generation to the next. They represent worldviews, cultural values, and beliefs of the communities that preserve them. They are frequently used to explain natural phenomena, uphold moral principles, and preserve collective memories. They frequently include human characters, animals, spirits and deities. Folktales connect the social and spiritual, the human and supernatural, and are rooted in everyday life but influenced by

imagination. As William Bascom, an American folklorist and anthropologist explains, “Folklore, including folktales, serves to amuse, to validate culture, to educate, and to maintain conformity to accepted patterns of behavior” (333).

Indian folktales, which have their roots in the subcontinent's varied linguistic, cultural, and religious traditions, are oral histories of the Indian subcontinent. In rural and tribal societies, intimate relationships between people, animals, spirits, and deities reflect their daily lives, beliefs, and spiritual worldviews. A.K. Ramanujan, an Indian poet, says, “Indian folktales are not simply told for entertainment; they are cultural documents that mirror the values, anxieties, and imaginations of the communities that tell them” (Ramanujan xx). The collection *Tribal Folktales of Tripura*, written by D. K. Tyagi, was originally released in 1997 by the Tripura State Tribal Cultural Research Institute & Museum, Government of Tripura, Agartala. The book is a government-sponsored ethnographic collection that aims to preserve, translate, and publish the oral folktales of the indigenous tribes of Tripura. It was produced during a time when tribal cultural documentation was a major focus of the Tribal Research and Cultural Institute.

The Feminist Earth

Eco feminism is a moment that gives environment and feminism a unique setting. In *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, Karen J. Warren an Ecofeminist states,

> The same logic that allows men to justify dominating women is the one that allows humans to justify dominating nature. Both rest on a hierarchical dualism: man over woman, culture over nature, reason over emotion, mind over body. This logic of domination is not natural but socially constructed, and it authorizes violence, exploitation, and silencing. To dismantle it requires a new ethic—one that recognizes care, reciprocity, and interdependence as the basis for both human and ecological survival (Warren).

In Tripura folktales, dual narratives exist; some stories uphold patriarchal norms, while others celebrate women’s role as guardians of the environment, reflecting the region’s ecological values. In

"The Tale of Sakhi Darlong - The Deer Mother" narrates the life of Shyamacharan, a 17-year-old widower who, during a hunt, brings home a deer that transforms into his wife on the condition that he never calls her "Shaki Darlong." ""The girl said, "I can become your wife only if you promise that you will never call me "Sakhi (deer) Darlong"" (Tyagi 25). When, in drunkenness, he breaks this condition, she reverts to her deer form and flees into the forest. Shyamacharan remarries, but the deer secretly nurtures her children by bringing them food. The jealous second wife seeks to kill her. Before dying, the deer instructs that her breasts be placed beneath a simul tree so that it can feed her children. She states, "You can kill me and fulfil the desire of your wife. However, before you kill me, you take my breast and place it somewhere so that it becomes a simile. The tree will then feed my children" (Tyagi 26). When the tree is cut down, its dust is cast into a river, where it transforms into a great fish that sustains the children. In the end, the mother-deer takes her children into the river, where they live happily. The transformation of Sakhi Darlong in the folktale can be compared to Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1972). In Kafka's work, Gregor Samsa awakens one morning to find himself transformed into monstrous vermin, a change that underscores the themes of alienation, family exploitation, and social estrangement. The narrator says,

> One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug in bed. He lay on his armor-hard back and saw, as he lifted his head up a little, his brown, arched abdomen divided up into rigid bow-like sections. From this height, the blanket, just about ready to slide off completely, could hardly stay in place (Kafka 1).

Similarly, Sakhi Darlan's transformation into a deer reflects patriarchal oppression and rejection by her family. However, the two texts diverge in their symbolic meanings. While Kafka presents metamorphosis as estrangement from both nature and society, Sakhi Darlong's transformation embodies harmony with nature, suggesting resilience and continuity between the feminine and the ecological world.

Avian symbolism through wings

Folktales often use bird imagery to represent change, freedom or the soul's journey. It signifies cultural transformation and is associated with fertility rituals and clan totems. In the tale, "The Horn Bill" there lives Kachak Roy, a lazy Jhumia, and his hardworking wife Sampari, who do both the field work and the housework. Although Kachak treats her badly, Sampari loves him deeply. After several years, she gives birth to a son. One day, when Sampari is in the jhum field, Kachak neglects the child and immerses himself in playing the flute. A bear enters their house and carries the baby away. When Sampari returns, she discovers the loss and curses her husband in grief. She curses that in his next life he would turn into a bird with a long beak like his flute and would tirelessly feed his wife and children. She says,

> You careless husband, in next birth you will be a bird and your beak will be as long as your flute. Your voice will be coarse and harsh. Your wife will watch it without moving till the young bird can fly. You will have to feed the mother bird throughout the day. You alone will have to do all the work and there will be no one to help you (Tyagi 14).

Since then, it is believed that hornbills live this way. The female stays in the nest with the eggs while the male fetches food until the chicks can fly. Hornbills are compared to the albatross in S. T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In the poem, during the voyage, the mariner and his crew are blessed by the presence of an albatross, but the mariner shoots it, bringing a curse upon the ship. In the folktale, the hornbill is cursed for neglecting and being selfish within family life. The albatross is cursed for being violent against a sacred being in nature. Both demonstrate how the bird in folktales and literature embodies the sacred law of balance. Each shows the consequences of breaking the human bond with the bird.

The next tale, "The Royal Swan" is set in a modest village, in which a destitute widow and her son face difficulties in sustaining themselves. One day, the son captures a swan from the king's pond and takes it home. Unaware of its royal ownership, they prepare and consume it themselves. The king's

guards soon realize that the swan is missing and apprehend the son. Troubled, the widow dreams of an elderly woman who advises her to conduct a ritual by offering a swan feather to the royal pond and honouring the goddess Chha Kol Ok. The unknown lady said, “Do not worry. Your son will return home soon. Take a feather from the swan and throw it in the royal tank while chanting the name of “Chha Lol Ok”. Don’t look back while returning home from the royal pond” (Tyagi 83). By following these directions, the widow's son is freed, and the villagers participate in the ceremony. With the goddess's blessings, the widow and her son enjoy a happy life thereafter. Similarly, “The Royal Swan” is compared to “The Ugly Duckling” written by Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen in his collection *The complete Fairytales and Stories*, which shows how a mocked and rejected young duck changes into a beautiful swan. Andersen states, “He was no longer a clumsy, grey creature, ugly and offensive. He had become a swan. The great swans swam around him and stroked him with their beaks. The little children shouted joyfully, ‘A new one has come!’ And the young swan felt that he had never been so happy before” (119).

In the tribal folktales of Tripura, the swan is associated with purity, dignity, and cosmic harmony. In Andersen’s “Ugly Duckling,” Swan stands for beauty, self-discovery after adversity, and personal transformation. Together, the “Royal Swan” and the swan in “Ugly Duckling” emphasize the universal fact that swan hood equates to dignity, purity, and a genuine identity. One portrays it as a personal transformation that is earned, while the other portrays it as a divinely bestowed grace. Northrop Frye, a Canadian literary critic, argues in *Anatomy of Criticism* that, “Myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative” (136). In both hornbill and swan narratives, the bird becomes an archetypal image through which myth conveys ideas of retribution, sacred blessing, and transformation.

Celestial Voices

Tribal folktales centred on deities and ancestral spirits function as repositories of oral heritage, protecting collective memory, and reinforcing identities that stand apart from dominant cultural

frameworks. Vine Deloria, an author and theologian, in *God is Red* says, “For tribal peoples, the sacred is not found in a book but in the land, the water, the animals, and the spirits that inhabit them” (67).

In the tale of “The Monkey Bride”, there lives a jhumia family whose headman, Naren has seven sons. As he grows older, he decides to arrange their marriages and devises a test for selecting brides. On the appointed day, each son comes with a bow and arrow, and Naren instructs them to shoot the arrows. Wherever the arrow lands, the girl from that household would become the son’s bride. While the elder sons’ arrows fall on houses, the youngest son’s arrow strikes a dry tree, where a female monkey is found and captured. Abiding by Naren’s decision, the youngest son marries the monkey bride. As years pass, Naran becomes very old. One day, he calls all his sons and says, “I have become very old, and I might die any day. I have a desire to eat food cooked by my daughter-in-law” (Tyagi 111). The monkey bride overhears her husband speaking of his father’s wish. That night, she transforms into a beautiful woman and secretly prepares food, which is served to the king. The king admires the dish presented by the seven daughters-in-law. Likewise, when asked to weave garments, the monkey bride produces the most exquisite cloth decorated with animal motifs, which greatly pleases the king. Later, she visits her mother in heaven and receives a magical ring. With its power, she transforms their modest home into a palace and her husband’s silver cot into gold. When he awakes, he sees a beautiful woman beside him and notices that monkey skin has been discarded. Finally, he realizes the truth that his wife is the daughter of Lord Indra, cursed to live as a monkey until her destined liberation.

The tale of “The Monkey Bride” may be compared to the French fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast” written by Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont. In “Beauty and the Beast,” Belle, a young woman, sacrifices her freedom to save her father and stays with the Beast, a monstrous prince, in return. Over time, she develops love and compassion for him, which ultimately breaks the curse and transforms the beast back into a prince. Leprince de Beaumont states, “Do not be deceived by appearances. There is good hidden beneath the hideous form” (Beaumont). “Beauty and the Beast” depicts the supernatural as a moral and spiritual power that directs transformation, while “The Monkey Bride” weaves deities into

the story, framing transformation as both a curse and a blessing from the divine. In both tales, spirits and deities act as agents of fate, guiding human experiences of love, sacrifice, and redemption.

Conclusion

Folktales of Tripura embody the deep interconnection between humans, animals, spirits, and the natural world. They reveal how cultural memory is preserved through transformation, symbolism, and ecological wisdom. The stories' ultimate message is that folklore is a living repository of survival, creativity, and balance with the natural world.

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